

Moving at the Speed of Opportunity

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Someone told me recently that the current state of generative AI¹ today is comparable to what cell phones were in 2008. Remember pulling up little antennas in days before unlimited texting? What will AI be doing in 2033?

We had better keep up with it. Elon Musk is afraid AI will take over the planet. Every English Lit teacher I know is concerned as well. It was one thing for students to buy a term paper online; now AI can generate “original” ones.

The development of generative AI accelerates what is known as the “Digital Divide.” Lack of digital skills impacts states, particularly rural communities, as well as groups that fall under the DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) populations. Looking even further down the road, even higher-level digital skills will be needed to succeed in our economy.

Our NEW North² region has a good start on this. In 2017 we were one of six regions in the country that Microsoft chose to develop *TechSpark*, a free digital training initiative using LinkedIn as a training platform in six key career areas: Administrative Professional, Project Manager, Software Developer, Data Analyst, Business Analyst, and Systems Administrator.

This initiative took another step forward in 2019 when *TechSpark* partnered with Gener8tor, a Madison based company, to guide cohorts of learners through the Microsoft training called *Gener8tor Skills Accelerator (GSA)*, to offer coaching, career development, and job placement. Bay Area Workforce Development Board, my former company, worked closely with Microsoft’s Michelle Schuler from the start, and was the first workforce board in the country (there are about 500 boards now) to partner with Gener8tor on this.

These two initiatives have been a resounding success in NEW North. In 28 months, GSA upskilled 141 individuals with 83% of graduates securing jobs at an average annual salary of \$54,000. Over 100 members of NEW Manufacturing Alliance took advantage of the program to upskill 830 existing workers in data analysis, project management, and cybersecurity in addition to basic digital literacy. Following that success Microsoft has now expanded the program nationwide.

¹ Generative AI refers to deep-learning models that can generate high-quality text, images, and other content based on the data they were trained on. (IBM)

² NEW North is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit regional marketing and economic development corporation that fosters collaboration among private and public sector leaders throughout the 18 counties of Northeast Wisconsin.

Even more exciting, Gener8tor, working with Bay Area Workforce Development Board and Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, has just launched a new job training program that combines generative AI and project management skills. This free training will provide project managers with the skills and tactical knowledge to apply generative AI in the workplace.

We are fortunate in NEW North to have a head start on this opportunity to address the Digital Divide. That said, AI is not standing still. If the analogy to cell phones holds true, we will have to pedal even faster to keep up in the coming years. Fortunately, here in our area, we have the tools to compete for success in the future.